

## Topic Eight – Avoiding Bias in Observations and Judgments



### Coaching, Evaluating and Delivering Constructive Feedback – Learning Series

We are pleased to bring you ***“Avoiding Bias in Observations and Judgments;”*** the eighth in a series of communications that discuss the value that coaching brings to your management practice and team leadership. The content presented will provide an overview of what it means to identify and avoid bias when making observations and judgments about your employees. In addition to this message, this topic also includes an Intercultural Communication Job Aid with definitions and examples to assist you in your practice.

To reference previous topics, please click on the Coaching Series Home link located in the Quick Links section of this web page.

Thanks for all you do.

#### **Overview: Avoiding Bias in Observations and Judgments**

Observation is the activity of carefully noticing what others are doing in order to gain or gather information. Judgments are opinions or conclusions, often the output of our daily decision making. Both require careful consideration to understand how they contribute to workplace interactions and enable you to treat all employees fairly and equally.

As important as avoiding bias in judgments and observations is, it is almost as difficult to control. Many of your observations and judgments are affected by your “cultural lens”. A “cultural lens” is the perspective a person brings to a situation based on background, culture, upbringing, experiences, etc. Whenever you make observations and judgments, you apply your cultural lens. In many ways a cultural lens is useful. It helps you empathize with those like you or who have similar experiences. However, it can also limit your ability to understand those who are dissimilar from you. In these instances, we bring bias – that we’re probably not fully aware of – to the situation.

Effective coaching depends on forming a shared understanding of what is happening or has happened in the workplace. When your existing opinions and perspectives affect your observations and judgments, they can interfere with workplace relationships. This may ultimately lead to frustration and reduced productivity for all parties involved. Careful attention to your observations and judgments and a conscious effort to “park” those existing opinions while gathering objective information, gives you greater opportunities to engage in productive dialogue with employee.

For example, many people born in the U.S. view maintaining eye contact as a sign of interest and attentiveness. However, in some Asian cultures it is considered polite and respectful to have only brief eye contact. Before making a judgment about what someone’s eye contact may be telling you, consider all of the possibilities. Could he or she be from a culture that prefers brief eye contact? Could he or she have a vision issue that makes maintaining eye contact difficult?

So how can you control something that you’re not fully aware of? You have to make yourself aware, and you have to be

very thoughtful and thorough when making observations and judgments. A number of keys to avoiding bias in judgments and observation are listed below.

## Benefits of Avoiding Bias in Observations and Judgments

The benefits of **Avoiding Bias in Observations and Judgments** are outlined below:

- More effective results from coaching efforts
- Avoiding miscommunications which could result in lost productivity
- Avoiding misperceptions of your actions which could lead to litigation
- Focusing on the facts keeps discussions professional, not personal
- Fair and equitable treatment of employees
- Greater opportunity for productive dialogue with employees
- More engaged and productive employees

## Keys to Avoiding Bias in Observations and Judgments

When observing employees:

**Stick to the facts:** A fact is something you've seen or heard, not your explanation of why it happened or the motivations of the parties involved. When you attribute reasons or rationales, you're making judgments that are prone to error.

**Don't depend on hearsay:** If you receive second-hand information, find a way to confirm what you have heard with hard facts or by approaching the original source for confirmation.

**Make multiple observations:** If you have a concern about an employee or are trying to verify second-hand information, more data is better. Try to observe a variety of situations to collect the most complete data you can. Sometimes observing other parties who interact with a particular employee can also shed light on an employee's performance in a team. For example, an employee's difficulties interacting with a team member might depend on both parties; seeing both employees may help you address the situation more effectively and more objectively.

**Test your assumptions:** Even before a coaching conversation, you can discuss your interpretations with trusted colleagues. Make your own observations of the employee(s) involved. Then during a conversation approach assumptions cautiously. For example, if you notice that an employee has been consistently working late and you are concerned that the employee needs assistance with technical matters, you can ask: "I notice you've been putting in a lot of hours. How is your work going?" This kind of open-ended question can encourage your employee to explain, relieving you of the need to make a flawed assumption.

**Ask for verification:** Never suggest an interpretation without having your employee confirm your thoughts, e.g., "I thought that some extra training might help alleviate your workload. Do you agree this would help?" Even if your employee disagrees, your confirmation question can help open the door to a more accurate statement of reasons and rationales.

**Be willing to adjust:** As new facts come to light, or as your employee offers his or her own interpretations, do not assume that you were right all along. Be flexible and change your judgments to stay consistent with what you know about the situation.

## Next Steps

**Activities:** For additional information on how culture impacts communication, please take a moment to review the Job Aid listed below.

- [\*\*Variables Influencing Intercultural Communication Job Aid\*\*](#)

**Coming Next: Diffusing Difficult Situations** is often a part of the job of managers and supervisors, and is the next topic in this series. It will provide you with strategies to effectively navigate difficult situations.